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ABSTRACT

Changes in family life styles, particularly the increase in single-parent families, can affect children's behavior in school. Apparently, teenagers are able to cope more successfully with the conflict of loyalties and demands of their parents' divorce than are younger children. Educators designing support systems to provide families with opportunities to have positive interactions with their children's school need to consider the limitations encountered by single parents in terms of time, earnings, and energy. Two programs in Minneapolis, Minnesota at St. Anthony Village, New Brighton School District 282 have been designed to meet the needs of the single-parent home as well as the needs of more traditional family lifestyles in promoting the reading needs of children at school and at home. The first, Extended Learning--A Family Affair, attempts to partially modify elementary schoolhouses and to provide appropriate facilities, time, and direction for parents to help their children become more efficient readers. The Saturday Morning School operates with the cooperation of the education departments of local colleges and universities. In this second program, college students needing beginning practicum experiences with children are enlisted to provide adult models for young readers in local public libraries and elementary schools. (AS)

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Presentation: EXTENDED LEARNING: A FAMILY AFFAIR
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EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY

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"THE TIMES, THEY ARE A'CHANGIN'."

Although this folk lyric sung by Bob Dylan in the 60's could be applied to every decade, the changes experienced in family life styles during the 80's are perhaps some of the most profound, particularly in the area of single parent families. According to TODAYS EDUCATION (1983) one child in five lives with a single parent, or twice the proportion reported in 1970.

Educators are faced with significant statistics regarding divorce and one-parent homes.

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STATISTICS AS THEY ARE

With nearly one in every two marriages in the United States ending in divorce, (Jarolimek and Foster, 1981, p. 12), nearly half of the children born in 1980 can be expected to live in single-parent families before they turn eighteen (US Census Bureau, 1983). The most common exception to the conventional or traditional family is that of the mother and child(ren) living together after a divorce. Of these single mothers, two-thirds are employed outside of the home. In this "new family", the parent may be absent for substantial amounts of time in the child(ren)'s lives.

The educational community needs to consider how absence of parents may affect how children learn and how to provide opportunities that will enhance a single parent's ability to take a positive role in his or her child's education.

EFFECTS OF FAMILY CHANGES ON CHILDREN

The educational community notices the effects of changing families on the children's behavior in school. Teachers frequently find themselves entangled in web-like problems involving youngsters who are low achievers and/or discipline problems. The "web" may be complicated by the presence of children who are products of widely divergent and varied family life styles. Broken homes may be blamed for the poor achievement as well as the misbehavior. Such labeling or "blaming" ignores the fact that "many children from one-parent families achieve at extraordinarily high levels and present no behavior problems in school." (Jarolimek and Foster, 1981, p. 13).

Individuals react to divorce differently. According to Thomas Oakland (1984),

children's major problems are not caused by divorce but result when their basic needs are not met. While some youngsters may feel anger and resentment, others seem relieved that the strained relationship between the parents is ending. "Though they genuinely care about what is happening to their father and mother, their deeper concerns rest on what is happening to them." (Oakland, 1984, p. 66) Parents may become preoccupied with their own personal problems while remaining unaware of the depth the child's concerns or problems.

School age children from divorced homes are forced to grow up quickly when they assume more home responsibilities. The custodial parent may lean on the youngster for help and the child may feel overwhelmed. Elementary age children seem to encounter more post-divorce problems than do older adolescents. Apparently, teenagers are able to cope more successfully with the conflict of loyalties and demands of divorce than their younger brothers and sisters. "They (teenagers) are more in control of their lives." (Oakland, 1984, p. 80)

PROBLEMS OF THE SINGLE PARENT

Since most single parents work, educators will be forced to consider the limitations encountered by single parents in terms of (1) time, (2) earnings, and (3) energy.

Time. The parent who works eight hours each day is usually on-the-job during hours usually scheduled for conferences. This parent will not have time during school hours to participate in an "in-house" parent volunteer program. A working parent spends evening hours "catching-up" on the such necessary chores as grocery

shopping, preparing and serving dinner, and doing the laundry. And, not to be forgotten, the parent who works WORRIES for fear the children are not receiving the adequate help and supervision with school work required from the home.

Earnings. Many single parents have difficulty surviving financially, particularly those parents in the initial stages of digging out of the financial parts of a divorce. The working mother may have difficulty financing full-time baby-sitting for preschool children or day-care "in-keeping" services for the school age children. On the positive side however, only about 20% experience long term dependence on some form of welfare. Far more common is the practice of using welfare as a temporary, stop gap measure. (Anderson, Khleif, 1982)

Energy. Many newly separated, divorced, or widowed parents complain of the physical and emotional fatigue of managing a household and children without the support of the absent spouse. Lack of energy should not be viewed as a "back breaker" for the lone parent, working eight hours a day and suspected of being strapped - financially. The burden of such a schedule and the constant hassle of scraping to make ends meet may make evening hours and at-home time a retreat or haven for some parents.

Many single parents ARE finding the time, the money, and the energy to try to make a better life for themselves and for their families. Anderson and Khleif (1982) have noted that two-thirds of the single parent mothers they interviewed have increased their educational level, either through courses, college programs or workshops. Therefore, educators should not assume that single parents are too busy to get involved with their children's educational needs. Instead, explore and support ways to encourage and facilitate parental participation.

Fathers without custody. The early or beginning years of divorce are hardest - financially and time wise. Upper middle class fathers meet more regular and full amounts in child support payments than their lower socio-economic counterparts. However, fathers at all levels face the strain of financial demands and the time required in meeting those demands. Luckily, such financial straits can be temporary as remarriages occur, offspring become independent, and salaries paid to both parents improve with advanced job status.

Because more mothers than fathers retain custody of children, fathers estranged from their homes also face the actual lack of opportunity to provide assistance to their children during the school and growth years. . Evening hours with their children may be limited to weekends during which they have visiting "rights" or custody. With time being at such a premium, that time is usually considered better spent "socializing" and enjoying the pleasure of each other's company than on the mundane and sometimes threatening activities related to school work.

Need for support systems. Since most parents in the single-parent home situation are working parents, educators need to design support systems which can provide maximum service. Given recent public concerns discussed in the "Nation at Risk" report (1983), school systems and the community at large should make a concerted effort to provide appropriate opportunities for families to have more positive interaction with their schools.

Parents and educators alike have long acknowledged the positive effects of parental

involvement in children learning to read. Parents who are aware of what schools do to provide effective reading instruction are more supportive of the school program and are more effective in helping their youngsters at home. Anderson and Khleif (1982) state the situation for single parents:

> Single parent mothers and divorced fathers clearly need some help for the sake of a sizeable portion of our nation's children. And it is obvious that there are many unmet needs in the ranks of middle-income families, not just working class and lower class families - although needs of families with the lowest incomes are certainly pressing.
>
> What kind of assistance could this be?
>
> What would be appropriate, acceptable to the larger society and to mothers and fathers themselves? (p, 159)

PLANS FOR ASSISTANCE

A number of projects and programs are being developed and/or are in operation which are intended to meet the needs of the single-parent home as well as the needs of more traditional family life styles.

With the knowledge that children are more apt to model after their parents' behavior than to listen to a teacher's or parent's suggestions regarding reading, the

educational community needs to develop opportunities for children and parents to read together. Such activities provide experiences during which children may observe and mimic their parents. A single parent has an even greater need for this type of assistance because of additional family responsibilities.

Consideration should be given to modifying the traditional 9:00 am to 3:00 pm school day as matched against the 8:00 am to 5;00 pm workday for parents. Such consideration would enable a more compatible schedule for meeting home and school needs.

A wide variety of programs have been reported which attempt to promote involvement of working parents in meeting the reading needs of children at school and at home. Such programs usually emphasize evening meetings for parents, the development of pamphlets and brochures for parents to use at home, newsletters for parents, or video-taped programs.

One new program, EXTENDED LEARNING - A FAMILY AFFAIR (1984), is an attempt to partially modify school hours at the elementary grade level to offer parents an opportunity to be with their children within a school setting. The project extends and facilitates family reading/learning opportunities by having elementary media centers open and staffed from 3:30 to 7:30 pm once each week during the school year. The project provides appropriate facilities, time and direction for parents to help their children become more efficient readers.

A nutritious evening meal is provided, at reduced-costs, to allow families time to read together during the time saved by not having to rush home, prepare and

clean-up after a meal. This meal, paid for by the parents, thus has impact on children's health and attentive skills needed for learning.

Families are encouraged to read together in order to encourage the children to develop positive reading habits. In addition to improving reading skills, this program encourages parents and chidlren to become more aware of how they may use school facilities ouside "regular" school hours. Opportunities are provided for parents and preschool age children as well as school age youngsters to better use the material in media centers housed in school buildings.

Program costs may be kept to a minimum by reallocating work hours for librarians, involving local parent association groups to assist with some of the clerical tasks, and soliciting the aid of the director of food services of the school to provide a low cost meal.

SATURDAY MORNING SCHOOL (TODAY,1984) is another option for local schools which may be considered by educators and the public. Through the cooperation of the education departments of local colleges and universities, college students needing beginning practicum experiences with children may be enlisted to provide adult models for young readers in local public libraries and elementary schools.

Story telling, introduction to printed and nonprint materials, educational technology, and other learning opportunities may be scheduled for Saturday mornings. Parents are encouraged to bring the children to a comfortable, cheerful setting during which time they have opportunities to interact with college and university professors and practicum students. Local parent organizations have hosted Saturday morning

brunches in appropriate learning environments for busy, working parents and their pre-school and school-aged children.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Traditionally, homes, schools and libraries have been the focal point in teaching children to read. Realizing many American homes are now single parent homes, and the majority of all parents are working outside the home, schools and libraries may need to involve more parents in children's learning experiences. Organizations which deal with the reading needs of today's children will provide appropriate times for use of facilities, will encourage parents to attend with their children, and will offer guidance to family members.

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